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The Kiosk, Where Brick Meets Click

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Abstract (Article Summary)

If, that is, you can find a kiosk. So far, clicks and bricks is just a buzzword, said Francie Mendelsohn, a retail kiosk consultant. The founder of Summit Research Associates, Ms. Mendelsohn makes a living studying kiosks and argues that in many cases, "It is a solution in search of a problem." She added: "Everybody wants to do it. It's a really hot thing." But few stores have installed them and even fewer make good use of them.

Ms. Mendelsohn credited Bloomingdale's in Manhattan for good use of a kiosk. She cited Sephora, the beauty products retailer, as an example of a kiosk failure. "Sephora is so brilliant in so many ways, especially the way they present merchandise," she said. "But they stuck this kiosk way in the back and hardly anybody uses it. I asked the kiosk to compare lipsticks and it could not. Furthermore, the printer was broken."

[Borders] believes in the clicks-and-bricks idea. The PC that I used is being phased out as new kiosks, which will look more like kiosks, are being introduced with more powerful tools. Mr. [Rich Fahle] said he hoped that customers would be able to swipe a credit card into a kiosk to pay for special orders or stocked items, then have the gifts shipped anywhere. This would not only help buyers but cut the store's labor costs.

Full Text (1376 words)

Copyright New York Times Company Dec 13, 2000

AMABEL AMARANTO is the picture of a helpful Gap employee, pleasant, smiling and eager. With her headset, a high-tech device that makes selling jeans and T-shirts seem as urgent and life-dependent as air traffic control, she looks as modern as can be. But when I ask to see the store's Web kiosk, she says, "What's a kiosk?"

A kiosk is the centerpiece of what is being touted as a revolution, the biggest brick in so-called clicks-and-bricks retailing. The idea behind clicks and bricks is to meld the Internet with traditional store spaces to avoid the pitfalls of pure Internet retail (a moment to weep for Boo.com and Pets.com), while accelerating old-fashioned stores into the digital age. There are many ways to use the technology, its backers say, some promising, some hokey. But the main idea is to enable shoppers to touch and see what they are buying and still order over the Web. This could make holiday shopping a breeze.

If, that is, you can find a kiosk. So far, clicks and bricks is just a buzzword, said Francie Mendelsohn, a retail kiosk consultant. The founder of Summit Research Associates, Ms. Mendelsohn makes a living studying kiosks and argues that in many cases, "It is a solution in search of a problem." She added: "Everybody wants to do it. It's a really hot thing." But few stores have installed them and even fewer make good use of them.

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So if you thought that in-store kiosks were going to make your holiday shopping easy as pie, think again. A reporter scouring a Westchester County mall failed to find one. In San Diego, at the Fashion Valley Mall, this writer found two.

One was in a General Nutrition Center store. A small kiosk with touch-screen technology connected me to two Web sites, both of which promoted the supplements the store happened to sell, and explained why I must buy, for one, a bottle of astragalus, an herb. Needless to say, there was no way to connect to The New England Journal of Medicine to find another opinion about dietary supplements, and the opening screen for the Bio nutritional Encyclopedia site (the second site) gave me five seconds (there was a timer at the bottom of the screen) to read its long disclaimer about the advice I was being given.

I was more impressed with the kiosk in the Store of Knowledge, a PBS-linked retail chain that sells educational toys, games and books.

The setup was actually a personal computer connected to the Store of Knowledge Web site and the site of Dorling Kindersley, a British publisher that installed the kiosks. I searched for gifts according to recipient age and by type of merchandise, rather than wandering around the store. I could have ordered items the store did not stock, like a children's table, because they took up too much floor space. Or, using the site's concierge service from my PC at home, I could have ordered gifts, requested gift wrapping and picked them up at a store nearby.

"We rolled out the kiosks in all 91 Store of Knowledge stores," said Gary Gentel, the vice president for sales at Dorling Kindersley. "Sales are way up."

Robert Basset, the vice president for merchandising, marketing and e-commerce at the Store of Knowledge, plans to enhance the kiosks with scanners that will read a bar code and produce more information about the merchandise.

Still, Mr. Basset and Mr. Gentel acknowledged that true clicks and bricks had yet to arrive. "It is one of those issues people talk about and have not figured out how to execute," Mr. Basset said. "We are trying to understand its viability in terms of how we can service the customer better."

Service Merchandise, a discount jewelry and housewares retailer, is charging ahead, installing Web kiosks in its 220 stores. The company, which is trying to reorganize after filing for bankruptcy protection, has revamped its stores, and the kiosks are part of the makeover, said a spokeswoman, Brenda Adrian.

Not only can shoppers buy items sold in the stores through the kiosks (or online from home), there are other enticements. "If you go into the kiosks, you can get coupons from them for anything you purchase that day," Ms. Adrian said. "Or you can see a display model, and if the store does not have it in stock, you order it from a kiosk to be delivered to your home."

BORDERS is among those retailers furthest along the kiosk path. When I entered a Borders in San Diego, I used a kiosk's Title Sleuth site on the store's intranet. I typed in a title I figured Borders might not carry. It was a book I wrote called "Green Cathedrals" that usually can't be found with a search party, but it popped right up on Title Sleuth, along with instructions to walk to the information desk to special-order it.

"There are three million items at Borders, but each store can only carry about 200,000 at a time," said Rich Fahle, the content manager at Borders.com. "With the kiosks, our customers have access to everything."

Still, 200,000 is a lot of items, and Borders stores are huge. The Borders kiosk in the Mission Valley store in San Diego provided store maps pinpointing where to find the item entered into the Sleuth search.

Borders believes in the clicks-and-bricks idea. The PC that I used is being phased out as new kiosks, which will look more

like kiosks, are being introduced with more powerful tools. Mr. Fahle said he hoped that customers would be able to swipe a credit card into a kiosk to pay for special orders or stocked items, then have the gifts shipped anywhere. This would not only help buyers but cut the store's labor costs.

The last kiosk I tried was at a Sam Goody in downtown San Diego. There, kiosks from RedDotNet allowed me to buy compact discs and "produce" and "burn" a custom CD.

The kiosk was very sexy looking, with video and all, but I found it limited. I tested it with music from some of my favorite, though not top-selling, artists. While it offered selections from the bluesman Junior Kimbrough, it came up empty with Los Straitjackets and the Paladins.

I also tested the customizing function, picking a song to be burned onto a CD. The kiosk printed a receipt that I was to take to the cashier, where the CD would be made. But the cost of one song was \$4.48.

Some malls are installing jumbo kiosks that can benefit all the stores. Jones Lang LaSalle, a management services company, is installing kiosks in six malls that it manages. The kiosks, created by a business called BigFatWow, will feature 6 to 12 terminals, including keyboards, high-speed Internet access and large plasma-screen monitors.

"It's a customer amenity," said Liz Gillespie, the director of retail innovation at Jones Lang. "And it is a tool for retailers who do not have Web access. The customer can just walk out of the store to the kiosk and access the retailer's Web site right there."

With the video display ability, Ms. Gillespie envisioned a cooking demonstration at the kiosk and the products' Web sites on the terminals with, naturally, a map of the store.

If all this promise really does come true, holiday shopping may be simpler. But make no mistake. Convenience is secondary. Stores and malls want shoppers to spend money. As the BigFatWow Web site says, the company's kiosks could deliver "one billion advertising impressions per year." It does not say how it will make our lives any better.

[Photograph]

All 91 Stores of Knowledge have electronic sales kiosks. John Flores, left, helped Franc Happ and his son Justin operate one at a mall in San Diego. (Robert Burroughs for The New York Times)

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